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BIENNIAL REPORT ON EVALUATION

Report of the Director, Division for Oversight Services

Summary

The purpose of the biennial report on evaluation is to assess the performance of the evaluation function at UNFPA as well as the quality of evaluations. The report also assesses the ability of the Evaluation Branch, Division for Oversight Services, to address both the coverage and the quality of evaluations. It analyses the corporate challenges associated with evaluation gaps at UNFPA. Finally, the report addresses ways to improve the evaluation function at UNFPA.

The Executive Board may wish to take note of the present report.

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I. Purpose of the biennial report on evaluation

1. In accordance with Executive Board decision 2009/18, the biennial report on evaluation addresses the performance of the evaluation function at UNFPA as well as the quality of evaluations.

2. In the previous biennial report on evaluation (DP/FPA/2010/19), the Director, Division for Oversight Services, indicated the need for the evaluation function at UNFPA to adapt to the new context of development assistance, characterized by multiple partnerships and leadership by programme countries. The Director also emphasized the need for UNFPA to equip itself with expertise to meet the requirements of the evaluation policy that the Executive Board approved in June 2009 (decision 2009/18). The present report assesses the extent to which UNFPA has made progress in addressing these two challenges, in particular within the boundaries of its evaluation policy.

3. The purpose of this report is to: (a) take stock of two years of implementing the evaluation policy; (b) examine the quality of decentralized evaluations and discuss the challenges stemming from the Executive Board requirement that each country programme be evaluated at least once during its cycle; (c) assess the performance of the evaluation function, in particular in the light of the conclusions of the 2010 biennial report on evaluation (DP/FPA/2010/19); and (d) propose improvements that may be considered within the framework of the review of the evaluation policy.

II. Achievements of the Evaluation Branch, Division for Oversight Services: addressing both the coverage and the quality of evaluations

4. In 2010 and 2011, country offices complied with the requirement to produce and submit an end-of-cycle evaluation of their programmes. However, as indicated by the quality assessment conducted by the Evaluation Branch in 2011, the resulting country programme evaluations fell short of expectations in terms of quality. As of 2011, the Evaluation Branch initiated a process that seeks to reverse this state of affairs in order to provide assurance that UNFPA complies with the Executive Board request for good-quality evaluations.[1] This has led to the establishment of: (a) a new, comprehensive evaluation quality assessment system aligned with internationally recognized norms and standards; and (b) a three-tiered evaluation quality enhancement process (including elaborating a methodology, conducting selected country programme evaluations, and reinforcing local evaluation capacities).

A. A new evaluation quality assessment system

5. In response to the request from the Executive Board, all country programmes concluding in 2010 and 2011 were subject to an evaluation prior to the elaboration of the subsequent draft country programme documents. This raised the evaluation coverage from 14 per cent in 2009 to 100 per

[1] "The Executive Board requests the Executive Director to safeguard the quality, impartiality and independence of the evaluation function and evaluations performed in UNFPA" (decision 2009/18); "The Executive Board welcomes the commitment of UNFPA to address weaknesses in evaluation quality in order to improve evidence-based programming" (decision 2010/26).

cent in 2011. However, as indicated by the results of the evaluation quality assessment[2] performed by the Evaluation Branch in 2011, the increase in the evaluation coverage in country programme evaluations was not accompanied by parallel progress in the quality of the evaluations.

6. Based on an assessment grid consisting of eight quality criteria and four assessment levels,[3] the evaluation quality assessment covered 34 country programme evaluation reports,[4] of which 23 (68 per cent) were rated poor; eight were deemed unsatisfactory (23 per cent); and three (9 per cent) were considered good. None were assessed as very good. The results of the 2012 review show little improvement compared to the 2010 evaluation quality assessment review.[5]

7. According to the 2012 evaluation quality assessment report, the main weaknesses of the country programme evaluation reports produced by country offices relate to the lack of credibility of the findings and the validity of the conclusions, as well as the poor usability of the recommendations. Over 90 per cent of the reviewed reports are not based on sound analytical work. They mainly contain unsubstantiated findings. The conclusions in most evaluation reports consist of general statements that are not sufficiently grounded in the findings of the evaluations. Furthermore, the recommendations are not prioritized and often lack operational feasibility.

8. In order to better understand the difficulties and constraints faced by country offices in conducting evaluations, the Evaluation Branch launched a country programme evaluation survey.[6] The survey covered all 40 country offices that had conducted country programme evaluations in 2010 and 2011. It included questions on the planning, management and resources dedicated to country programme evaluations. The survey results indicated that country programme evaluations were inadequately planned. In particular, the time allocated to the exercise was generally too short (an average duration of three months), and the evaluations were insufficiently funded (an average cost of $37,000 or 0.25 per cent of the average country programme budget). Furthermore, country programme evaluations were not managed or performed by appropriately skilled country office staff and external experts. Country offices have reported a shortage of national consultants with relevant expertise.

9. By taking stock of the results of the evaluation quality assessment review and by studying the information obtained from the country programme evaluation survey, the Evaluation Branch devised a three-tiered strategy to enhance the quality of organization-wide evaluations.

B. A three-tiered quality enhancement process

10. In order to address the lack of expertise in evaluation in UNFPA, as underscored in the 2010 biennial report on evaluation, and as emphasized by the Executive Board in decision 2010/26,[7] the

[2] The 2012 evaluation quality assessment report is available at http://www.unfpa.org/public/home/about/Evaluation. Also see the main conclusions and recommendations of the report at: http://www.unfpa.org/public/home/exbrd/pid/10539.

[3] See the evaluation quality assessment grid and explanatory notes at http://web2.unfpa.org/public/about/oversight/evaluations/.

[4] Each country programme evaluation report underwent a thorough quality check by the Evaluation Branch. All quality assessments are posted (together with the relevant country programme evaluation report) on the evaluation database of the Division for Oversight Services at: http://web2.unfpa.org/public/about/oversight/evaluations/.

[5] See the 2009 evaluation quality assessment report at http://www.unfpa.org/public/home/about/Evaluation/pid/9137.

[6] The survey and its results are presented in detail in the 2012 evaluation quality assessment report (see footnote 2).

[7] "[The Executive Board] welcomes the actions of UNFPA to strengthen its human resources throughout the organization in order to implement the evaluation policy, and the commitment to invest in staff expertise for evaluation, including in results-based management, evaluation design, methodologies, implementation and conduct" (decision 2010/26).

Division for Oversight Services built a robust and skilled Evaluation Branch,[8] responsible for improving the evaluation function at UNFPA and the quality of its products. The Evaluation Branch adopted a three-tiered quality enhancement process consisting of: (a) developing a handbook on how to design and conduct a country programme evaluation at UNFPA; (b) conducting selected country programme evaluations in collaboration with the concerned country offices; and (c) designing and conducting training sessions on country programme evaluation methodology in order to develop the evaluation capacity of UNFPA country offices and their national counterparts.

11. The *Handbook on How to Design and Conduct a Country Programme Evaluation at UNFPA* familiarizes users with the basic concepts, approaches and techniques in evaluation and their application within the context of UNFPA country programme evaluations.[9] The handbook draws on lessons learned from two country programme evaluations conducted in 2011 in Bolivia and in Cameroon.[10] Based on the handbook, the Evaluation Branch also developed customized knowledge-sharing modules on designing and conducting country programme evaluations. With this new methodology, UNFPA seeks to strengthen the capacity of its country offices and national key partners in conducting country programme evaluations.

12. The Evaluation Branch will continue to conduct independent evaluations of country programmes to further support the development of evaluation capacity at the country level. The involvement of national partners and country office staff in the country programme evaluation reference group, as well as the inclusion of national and regional consultants in the evaluation team, are ways to strengthen the evaluation capacity in programme countries.

13. The challenges and shortcomings identified in the Bolivia and Cameroon country programme evaluations point to issues that are relevant at the corporate level, notably the necessity for UNFPA to equip its country offices with an effective, results-oriented monitoring system, as well as the development of mechanisms and control tools to ensure that country programme results and resources frameworks provide appropriate indicators, realistic outputs and accurate baselines. The main weaknesses identified in the Bolivia and Cameroon country programme evaluations are:

(a) Inadequate formulation of outputs. Outputs are generally formulated at a level that does not correspond to the level of results that are under the control of the UNFPA country office;

(b) Poor formulation of indicators. Indicators in country programme action plans are not effectively used for monitoring, and the poor formulation of indicators impedes their effective use as a tool for indicative measurement;

(c) Lack of a corporate emphasis on results-oriented monitoring. Despite the emphasis on results-oriented monitoring in the UNFPA strategic plan, insufficient attention is paid to results

[8] The Evaluation Branch, Division for Oversight Services, consists of professional staff hired from intergovernmental institutions and other United Nations organizations. They have experience in managing and conducting complex evaluations in the field of development.

[9] The *Handbook on How to Design and Conduct a Country Programme Evaluation at UNFPA* is available on the evaluation web page at: http://www.unfpa.org/public/home/about/Evaluation/Methodology.

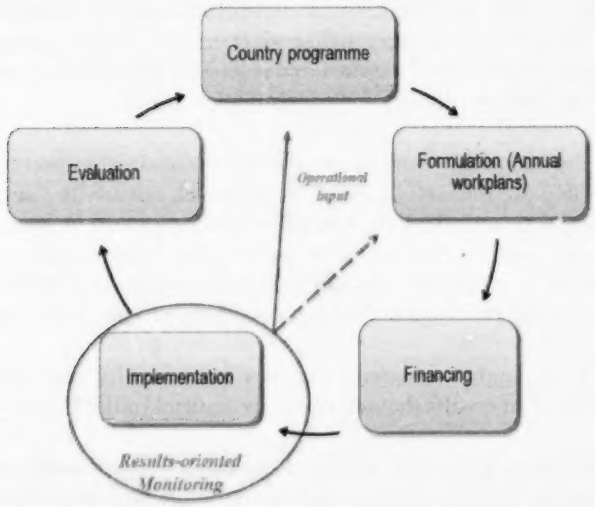
[10] See the main conclusions and recommendations of the Bolivia and Cameroon independent country programme evaluations at: http://www.unfpa.org/public/home/exbrd/pid/10539.

in day-to-day management practices. The focus is largely on budget expenditures and on the implementation of activities in country offices.

14. In the absence of an effective results-oriented monitoring system, country programme action plans and their associated results and resources frameworks suffer from deficiencies that, in turn, impair the quality, and therefore the credibility and usefulness, of evaluations at UNFPA. Monitoring is an indispensable complement to all evaluation activities because it provides: (a) information on the progress of programme implementation; and (b) a set of indicators against which evaluators must assess programme performance (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Results-oriented monitoring: the missing link in results-based management

Results-oriented monitoring provides information on the achievements of the programme at a specific time and over a period of time, relative to respective targets and outcomes. It guides the ongoing country programme and related annual workplans, and is an indispensable source of information for the country programme evaluation.



III. Corporate challenges and gaps in the evaluation function at UNFPA

15. In the previous paragraphs, the Evaluation Branch established the link between corporate weaknesses and the state of the evaluation function at UNFPA. The correlation between the systemic challenges faced by UNFPA and the gaps in the evaluation function was confirmed in the midterm review of the UNFPA strategic plan, 2008-2013 (DP/FPA/2011/11), as well as in external reviews of UNFPA performance.

16. The midterm review of the strategic plan, 2008-2013, stresses the gaps in: (a) the measurability system at UNFPA; and (b) accountability for results. This calls for a reassessment of the role of evaluation in UNFPA. While UNFPA has undertaken an assessment of its organizational setting, which developed into a new business plan, this process should not overlook the role of the evaluation function and how it could benefit an organization striving for operational excellence.

17. Recent external reviews[11] of UNFPA have also pointed to a number of systemic challenges, particularly in the following areas:

(a) Evidence-based programming;
(b) Knowledge management;
(c) Contribution to results;
(d) Independence of the evaluation function;
(e) Transparency and accountability;
(f) Development of national capacities in evaluation.

18. The UNFPA business plan[12] addresses the above-mentioned organizational issues. However, in order to achieve their full potential, the measures foreseen in the business plan must also address a number of gaps that affect the evaluation function.

[11] Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network, *2010 Common Approach Assessment of UNFPA*, January 2011; United Kingdom Department for International Development, *Multilateral Aid Review: Assessment of the United Nations Population Fund* (2011).

[12] Statement by the Executive Director to the UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS Executive Board, February 2012 (see http://unfpa.org/public/home/news/pid/9946) and a presentation on UNFPA internal audit and oversight and the business plan (see http://www.unfpa.org/public/home/exbrd/pid/8683).

Table 1

Current organizational challenges and the identification of related gaps within the evaluation function at UNFPA

ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES	EVALUATION GAPS
Evidence-based programming	
(a) Limitations in results frameworks (such as the definition of outputs and outcomes, lack of clarity in the results chain, mislabelled results) impair the ability to link results across organizational levels.	**Gap 1:** The evaluation function lacks information produced by an effective results-oriented monitoring system. Results-oriented monitoring: (a) ensures the soundness of results frameworks (in particular, with regard to indicators, targets and the causality chain); and (b) is a building block of a robust evaluation function.
(b) Country programme documents do not consistently emphasize changes made to country-level programming, based on prior performance.	**Gap 2:** Evaluations results do not sufficiently guide the programming process.
(c) Programming could be improved at the country level by using demonstrated evidence of effectiveness to support the choice of UNFPA strategies and interventions.	**Gap 3:** There are too few methodologically sound evaluations to ensure the creation of a substantial body of evidence to inform programming.
Knowledge management	
(a) Adjustments made or recommended to the organization's policies and strategies are inadequately reported and disseminated. (b) Reporting on lessons learned is insufficient. (c) Country programme action plans are inconsistent in their use of targets to help to manage progress towards expected results.	**Gap 4:** Insufficient dissemination of the findings, conclusions and lessons learned of evaluations.
Contribution to results	
(a) The implementation of recommendations of country programme evaluations is low organization-wide.	**Gap 5:** Insufficient incorporation of recommendations partially due to: (a) the poor quality of evaluation reports; and (b) management responses, which are not yet an established practice at UNFPA.
(b) UNFPA does not sufficiently report on results in a way that focuses on impact and demonstrates the effectiveness of its interventions. Results are too output-focused.	**Gap 6:** Evaluations currently performed outside the Division for Oversight Services are not sufficiently focused on the effectiveness of interventions. Instead, they primarily assess processes, activities and outputs.
Independence of the evaluation function	
(a) The United Nations Evaluation Group's norms and guidelines for evaluation in the United Nations system stipulate that the evaluation function must be located independently from other management functions.	**Gap 7:** The Division for Oversight Services is the guarantor of the independence of the evaluation function at UNFPA. Evaluations managed outside of the Division for Oversight Services do not meet the independence requirement.

(b) The quality of design, methods and tools for conducting evaluations is correlated to the level of independence of the evaluation function.	**Gap 8:** The current fragmentation of evaluation activities between the Division for Oversight Services, the Programme Division and the Technical Division does not permit an effective linkage for conducting evaluations with quality assurance and suitable methodologies.
Transparency and accountability	
(a) UNFPA has a weak culture of evaluation. (b) Information on the performance of UNFPA programmes is not sufficiently publicized.	**Gap 9:** UNFPA does not have a streamlined policy regarding the planning, reporting and availability of evaluation reports for the Executive Board, national stakeholders and the public.
Development of national capacities in evaluation and participatory evaluation processes	
(a) Evaluations conducted at UNFPA have little or no participation by implementing partners and beneficiaries.	**Gap 10**: In its current, fragmented state, the evaluation function cannot comply with the UNFPA evaluation policy, which focuses on "strengthening national evaluation capacity by using participatory and inclusive approaches".

IV. Conclusion

19. In June 2009, the Executive Board approved the UNFPA evaluation policy. The policy is a first attempt by UNFPA to equip itself with a regulatory framework in order to better fulfil its mission in the field of evaluation. The policy seeks to establish a common institutional basis for the UNFPA evaluation function and to increase transparency, coherence and efficiency in generating and using evaluative knowledge for organizational learning, managing for results and accountability.

20. When it approved the evaluation policy, the Executive Board expressed mixed views about the approach adopted by UNFPA, in particular regarding: (a) the independence of the evaluation function; (b) the roles and responsibilities of different entities; (c) the use of evaluation results; and (d) the link between lessons learned from evaluations and results-based management.[13] In decision 2009/18, the Executive Board requested the Executive Director to make a number of amendments to the evaluation policy. Yet, the Board fell short of rectifying the original weaknesses in the policy, as revealed by two years of its implementation. As of now, the evaluation framework at UNFPA does not permit the organization to address both internal challenges, such as building an evaluation culture, and external challenges, such as building the evaluation capacity of partner countries.

21. It is the view of the Division for Oversight Services that the guiding principle of an effective and efficient evaluation function at UNFPA should rest upon the distinction between: (a) the management of the evaluation function; (b) the use of evaluation results to improve programming; and (c) the creation of a results-oriented monitoring system.

[13] See DP/FPA/2009/4.

22. The Division for Oversight Services therefore recommends that UNFPA take the following steps:

(a) The Evaluation Branch, Division for Oversight Services, should fully exercise its evaluation management function by restoring the necessary link between the accountability and learning dimensions of evaluation, which are artificially split, as per the UNFPA evaluation policy.[14] However, a unified evaluation function does not preclude that a number of evaluation-related tasks may be performed in distinct organizational units.

(b) Ensuring the use of evaluation results (for example, the issuance and follow-up of management responses; ensuring that recommendations and lessons learned guide programming; and identifying and sharing good practices) is key to improving programming. These evaluation-related tasks, which are also programme-related, should rest with the Programme Division.

(c) Besides the use of evaluation results, improved programming also necessitates the continuous input of data and information produced by an effective, results-oriented monitoring system (see figure 1). Such a system does not exist at UNFPA; current monitoring, as performed in country offices, is largely focused on budget expenditure and is activity-oriented.

23. In June 2009, the Executive Board encouraged UNFPA to "clarify roles and responsibilities within the Division for Oversight Services and with other divisions in UNFPA with regard to planning, implementation, supervision, quality assurance and follow-up, and elaborate how the evaluation function is distinguished from other oversight mechanisms, as well as clarify how evaluations differ from internal reviews."[15] This request revealed the concern of the Executive Board about the ambiguities contained in the UNFPA evaluation policy and their potential impact on the quality and credibility of evaluations at UNFPA. The biennial report on evaluation is timely since UNFPA will present the review of its evaluation policy at the second regular session 2012 of the Board. It is the hope of the Division for Oversight Services that the present report will be taken into account in the review of the UNFPA evaluation policy, with the intention of filling identified evaluation gaps in order to improve corporate performance.

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[14] This fragmentation, whereby evaluators are placed within a number of divisions (notably the Programme Division), is also in breach of the norms and standards of the United Nations Evaluation Group, which state that *"the evaluation function must be located independently from other management functions"*; see United Nations Evaluation Group Norms for Evaluation at www.uneval.org.

[15] See Executive Board decision 2009/18.